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## Aging Committee

Public Hearing on Proposed S.B. No. 79

### AN ACT REQUIRING ELECTRICAL POWER GENERATORS AT STATE-ASSISTED SENIOR HOUSING DEVELOPMENTS.

February 5, 2013

Testimony of Cathy Branch Stebbins

Members of the Housing Committee, my name is Cathy Branch Stebbins and I am the executive director for CONN-NAHRO, the Connecticut Chapter of the National Association of Housing & Redevelopment Officials, also known as Connecticut's membership association for public housing authorities. We have over 130 housing authority members and along with our affiliate organizations, CONN-NAHRO provides outreach to over 400 individual members.

Our membership understands and supports the good intentions behind SB 79. However, its implementation is problematic. While equipping senior housing with generators is a goal we can support in theory, its practical application is complicated and likely to be very expensive. How would this be funded? Further, we have concerns that housing authorities would be expected to serve as shelters. We are not properly staffed or funded to care for the complex needs of elderly people during a power emergency.

I think it is important to consider what generators can and cannot do in order to weigh the cost/benefits of this bill. In a single high-rise building, a generator can power a community room for a few days, but it is not possible to run an entire facility. It can possibly keep the lights on in some hallways, but cannot provide power or heat to the living units. It can help a kitchen staff to make sandwiches, and possibly keep one refrigerator running, but it cannot continue a usual meal service. Generators are much less suitable for garden-style apartments where there are individual units scattered throughout a complex, and where you would have to install, operate and maintain one generator per building for any results.

As the housing authority executive directors will tell you, the costs to install and maintain a suitably powered generator will vary quite dramatically depending upon the size and design of their facilities. These costs can only be estimated on a case-by-case basis and there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

As legislators considering this bill, you will need to weigh the cost/benefits of trying to heat or cool a common area alone when communities have fully funded and functional emergency shelters available. It may make more sense to bring the people to where there is power, versus bringing the power to where there are people. Housing authorities would only need to coordinate transportation of residents to shelters and provide communication with family members.

We cannot make a housing authority property a shelter because a shelter by law has to allow any person in need of shelter in, regardless of what community they are from. Some additional obstacles for housing authorities to operate a shelter are security concerns in some of our frail elderly properties, we cannot use program funds to run a shelter operation, and we do not have the staffing levels and expertise needed to operate a shelter. Housing authorities are primarily landlords and not staffed or equipped to deal with the full range of issues, including medical issues, that power outages present to a senior population.

Further, it must be noted that public housing authorities operate on very thin financial margins and are funded by rents. If housing authorities were required by law to fund the cost of generators, it would force us to raise the rents on tenants, the low-income households that housing authorities serve. Low and fixed-income households should not have to shoulder the burden of this expense. Further, the rent increase would vary quite widely based on the design & installation costs and the overall ongoing maintenance costs.

In a nutshell, the primary concerns of CONN-NAHRO's member housing authorities is, how will the goal be funded, at what cost for what marginal benefit, and a concern that housing authorities would be expected to serve as shelters, which we are not properly trained and staffed for, and which we cannot expend state or federal program funds toward.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of this bill.

Respectfully submitted,

Cathy Branch Stebbins